



**IDENTIFY AND PROTECT
YOUR
VITAL RECORDS**

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INTRODUCTION

Each Federal agency is responsible for establishing a Vital Records Program. Essentially, this means identifying, safeguarding, and having readily available documents, databases, and information systems that either support an organization's performance of its essential functions or are critical to preserving rights and interests. Vital records are required to support an organization's roles and responsibilities during and following an event that significantly disrupts normal operations, such as a national security emergency or natural disaster. A review of statutory and regulatory responsibilities and current file plans of offices that perform essential functions or preserve rights and interests is critical to the identification of vital records. Vital records should comprise a relatively small fraction of the organization's total volume of records and be an integral part of the organization's overall Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP).

TYPES OF VITAL RECORDS

Vital records consist of two basic categories of records: "emergency operating" and "rights and interest."

Emergency operating records, as defined by 36 CFR 1236, are those vital records essential to the continued functioning or reconstitution of an organization during and after an emergency. Included are emergency plans

and directives, orders of succession, delegations of authority, staffing assignments, relocation plans, selected program records required to continue critical organization operations, as well as policy or procedural records that assist agency staff in conducting operations during emergency conditions and normal operations after an emergency. Emergency operating records also include those records an organization needs in order to perform functions in support of another office's essential functions. (For example, information regarding foreign travel may be routine to the travel office but essential to an organization with personnel overseas who need to return during a crisis.)

Rights and interest records are those needed to protect an organization's essential legal and financial functions and activities, and the legal and financial rights of individuals directly affected by the organization. These records may not be needed during an emergency, so storage locations do not have to be at or in the vicinity of emergency operating facilities. Such records may be stored at a Federal Records Center or similar repository.

EMERGENCY OPERATING RECORDS

Emergency operating records are based on emergency missions, functions, and plans of operation. They should include records that support both critical activities *and* resumption to normal operations once the emergency or disaster has passed. The possibility that "normal operations" might not resume at the organization's original operating facility (for

example, in the case in which the original facility is destroyed) should be considered. Emergency operating records support the most critical activities the organization must perform if it operates under other than normal business conditions and in a facility other than its normal place of business. If due to size or frequency of updating, emergency operating records are retained in electronic form, appropriate equipment (computers, software and supporting services such as air conditioning and power) must be available at the emergency operations center and the alternate operating location to readily permit their use. Records in paper form are often appropriate as emergency operating records because their use does not rely on mechanical or electronic equipment. If available, electronic records may be accessed from remote locations via Virtual Private Networks or compact disks and may be the most accessible option, if use of paper records is prevented by the emergency.

Headquarters Level

Emergency functions and lead and support responsibilities are outlined for each agency in Executive Order 12656, Assignment of Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities. (See the “Additional Resources” section for the URL.) In addition to those records needed to operate emergency facilities, each Departmental office must identify records needed to perform essential agency functions such as those cited below. Each manager must ensure that critical operating records for emergency functions are identified within their area of responsibility,

duplicated and protected accordingly.

Among the Department's responsibilities from EO 12656 (Note: This list is not all inclusive.) the Department must:

- Develop implementation plans, operational systems and priorities for allocation of all energy resource requirements;
- Identify energy facilities essential to the mobilization, deployment and sustainment of resources to support the national security and national welfare, and develop energy supply and demand strategies to ensure continued provision of minimum essential services in national security emergencies;
- Assure the security of nuclear materials, nuclear weapons, and devices in the custody of Departmental production facilities;
- Ensure protection of unique research and development programs significant to national welfare, defense and security.

Facility/Site Level

At the facility/site level, emergency operating records are those needed to operate emergency operations facilities, mitigate the emergency occurrence and recover, so that the facility/site can resume normal operations. Examples of emergency operating records at this level include, but are not limited to:

- Emergency plans and directive(s), or other authorizing issuances, including information needed to operate the emergency operations center and its equipment, and records recovery plans and procedures;
- Orders of succession;
- Delegations of authority;
- Lists of emergency staff assigned to the emergency operations center, or other emergency duties, and authorized access to damaged facilities to assess the extent of damage (include names, addresses and telephone numbers and comparable data for alternates);
- Next-of-kin information, so that families of those injured can be notified;
- Vital records inventory, locations, file plans and protection methods;
- Site maps and engineering drawings, especially those that would be required to recover the use of a facility;
- Documentation for any electronic system designated an emergency operating system;
- Records required to protect the health and safety of personnel;
- Records required to support personnel on travel;
- Resources necessary to acquire office space and equipment.

Cognizant Field Element Level

Field element emergency operating records are a combination of those required at the site/facility level plus those records needed to perform any Departmental functions that the Headquarters may delegate to the field. Field/site offices so designated may also require records necessary to assume Headquarters leadership functions.

RIGHTS AND INTEREST RECORDS

Rights and interest records are those documents and systems needed to protect the legal and financial rights of the Department and all individuals directly affected by the Department's activities. Examples of rights and interests records include:

- Payroll, Financial and Budget records;
- Personnel, Leave, Health and Insurance records;
- Military, Social Security, and Retirement records;
- Contracts and Agreements;
- Grants and Leases;
- Entitlements;
- Obligations whose loss would impose a legal or financial risk;
- System documentation for electronic systems that manage personnel and financial systems.

VITAL RECORDS INVENTORY

An inventory of vital records should be developed and maintained at a number of different locations to ensure immediate access in any situation. Continuing re-appraisal of vital records is imperative. A review should be performed at least annually to ensure changing conditions are addressed and records are complete and up-to-date. The inventory should contain the records series or system title, description, type of vital record, name of office and individual responsible, medium, software/hardware requirements, physical location of copies, and date of last update.

PROTECTION OF VITAL RECORDS

Vital records must be protected against damage and loss. They must be kept current, complete and available. The most important factor guiding the selection of a method of protection for vital records is the ratio of the effectiveness of the protection method to the cost of that protection. The best choice is the one for which the cost of security is most closely aligned with the degree of risk. Beyond the evaluation of actual risk of loss for vital records, other factors that have a measure of importance in the selection of protection methods and the location of the backup copies include:

- Need for accessibility;
- Volume and length of retention;
- Frequency of update required;
- Security precautions;
- Physical susceptibility to destruction.

Some common methods of protection for vital records are:

- Preservation of existing duplicate copies at another location;
- Creation of special duplicate copies for off-site preservation;
- Preservation of source records which could be used to reconstruct vital records;
- Storage in special equipment, such as fire resistant cabinets, safes or vaults.

In choosing duplicate storage, a location should be selected that reduces the probability that the same disaster which affects the original records might also destroy the duplicate records. Some records require special environmental storage conditions which should be considered when selecting a storage facility.

A common protection method is maintenance of electronic copies on-site and off-site storage of duplicate paper copies at a Federal Records Center or other records storage facility. Whatever method is used, it is essential to develop a rotation schedule to keep the records up-to-date and to dispose of duplicates that are no longer needed. If electronic backups are maintained, the software and hardware must be routinely tested. As records are duplicated and/or sent to storage, they should be indexed to ensure easy accessibility when the information is required. Time is a crucial factor in emergency situations; therefore, regular systematic indexing of all vital records is a necessity.

RECORDS RECOVERY

Each Program should establish and maintain a plan to recover records that are damaged in an emergency or disaster, regardless of their media. To assist in an emergency, a resource list of disaster recovery firms in your area should be maintained with the vital records inventory. Records recovery specialists often concentrate on different areas of expertise (water damage, paper, tape, etc.), so the list should be comprehensive and kept current. The recovery plan should identify priorities and options for recovery or replacement. Current copies of records such as employee contact lists, Vital Records Inventory, and Information Recovery Plans should be maintained at multiple off-site locations to facilitate their use.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional planning resources for vital records include:

Title 36 CFR Part 1236.22 may provide additional information for the identification and protection of vital records, including those records required before, during and after emergencies along with those records needed to protect legal and financial rights.

Executive Order 12656, “Assignment of Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities” Part 7 pertains to the Department of Energy and can be accessed at:
<http://www.fema.gov/library/eo12656.shtm>.

The National Archives (<http://www.archives.gov>) provides a variety of training materials and publications regarding records management. One publication directly related to this topic is:

- **“Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation and Recovery: Instructional Guide”** - The guide addresses the identification and protection of records. There is an on-line version accessible at:
http://www.archives.gov/records_management/publications/vital_records.html.

The ARMA International (<http://www.arma.org>) is a not-for-profit association serving more than 10,000 information management professionals in the United States, Canada, and over 30 other nations. It sells several publications for a fee, including:

- **“Emergency Management for Records and Information Programs”** - The guide is organized by essential phases of emergency management and includes sample forms and checklists.
- **“Vital Records – A Guideline”** - The booklet contains a brief outline of steps in the development of a vital records program.

PRISM, International (<http://www.prismintl.org>) is a not-for-profit trade association for companies that provide their clients with protection, access, retention, storage and disposal of vital information. A resource list of companies offering services is available from the “For Information Managers” section of the web site.

ASSISTANCE

For assistance in identifying and protecting emergency operating records, contact the Office of Emergency Operations, NA-40. For assistance with rights and interest records, contact the Office of Business and Information Management, Records Management Division, IM-11.

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